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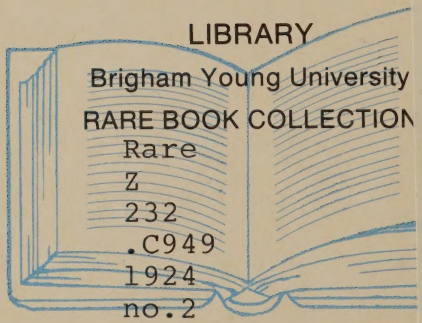
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SIXTY-THREE UNPUBLISHED DESIGNS
BY CLAUD LOVAT FRASER

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# CLAUD LOVAT FRASER

## SIXTY-THREE UNPUBLISHED DESIGNS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
HOLBROOK JACKSON

THE FIRST EDITION CLUB
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# INTRODUCTION

WHEN the critics have said their say and time has winnowed from the work of Claud Lovat Fraser all personal and contemporary associations, his book decorations and those unattached pictures which approximate to them will be revealed as his most original and most permanent contribution to art. Already there are anticipations of this anticipation. Mr. Albert Rutherston has expressed the opinion that Lovat Fraser 'never surpassed in delicate inventiveness or richness of imaginative quality those decorations done for the early chapbooks and broadsides which were published under the title of *Flying Fame*.'[1] As a matter of fact, and it is of considerable importance if a correct appreciation of Lovat Fraser's work is desired, the artist never passed out of what may be called his chapbook period, because that period was the man. He may have wandered in other directions, as, for instance, into the theatre, where he achieved notable successes, but such wanderings were excursions. There is, of course, room in the eternity of an artist's life for many inventions and adventures, even when that life is short according to temporal measurement, but in the greater number of instances those inventions and adventures throw-back

[1] *Claud Lovat Fraser*. By John Drinkwater and Albert Rutherston, London, 1923. p. 28.

or crystallize to or about a central theme or trick or whim which contains and expresses the artist and forms his art. Claud Lovat Fraser, brief as his days were, had several periods, but the chapbook period survived them all—even his invasion of the stage was through the door of a toy-theatre.

For that reason alone the discovery and publication of any of the work of this pervading period which has not hitherto been accessible is desirable, and where, as in the present circumstance, the drawings represent a complete and carefully conceived scheme of decorations for one of the most distinguished poetical works of our time, the matter is of first-rate importance. The decorations now first published in this volume were made for Mr. A. E. Housman's lyric-sequence, *A Shropshire Lad*. The author of that work would not, however, permit them to be printed with his poems. That is a matter which need not detain us long, for a writer should certainly be the final arbiter on the question of the illustration of his own creations, whatever rights he may have to yield in other directions. At the same time the refusal of a set of Lovat Fraser's delightful decorations is not likely to escape comment and perhaps even censure.

It may once again reopen the pleasant and eternally recurrent discussion of the rights and wrongs of illustrating literature in general; and since people will argue about books, that is as good a basis as any other and capable of provoking a pleasing variety of opinions. It is not my intention either here or elsewhere to enter the lists on either, or indeed any side, for there are many

more than two, and I am upheld in my decision by a deep-seated prejudice against most decoration of books or other things, still more against illustrations unless they are inevitable and indispensable interpretations of the text. And since above all essences I prefer my poetry neat, I would, were I inclined to dogmatize, lay it down as an axiom that poetry should never be illustrated and hardly ever decorated, and even then almost imperceptibly. Which argument may be suitably pointed by a familiar story from the legend of Mr. Whistler. The artist, so it is said, was once asked why he did not paint the Doge's Palace, or some other of the more popular buildings of Venice. He replied, 'Sir' (or Madam, as the case may be, and I rather fancy it was Madam), 'that building is a work of art already!' So is poetry. I only wish Mr. Housman agreed with me. That he does not is evident from the fact that he has permitted *A Shropshire Lad* to appear in an illustrated edition, the memory of which helps me to bear with fortitude the fact that he has turned down the work of Lovat Fraser. I am also further consoled by the thought that these charming drawings can only be divorced from the great verse which inspired them for duration of the copyright. Twenty or thirty short years hence publishers will be falling over one another in the effort to have first honours (and profits) from bringing about their wedding.

All of which is a little wide of the mark, for apart from any relationship to the poems which these drawings are supposed to illustrate, and which, in fact, they

do illustrate, they possess independent value as examples of Lovat Fraser's most characteristic work at its most mature stage. As illustrations of *A Shropshire Lad*, and even a decoration must have an illustrative genesis, they have not, let it be confessed, the inevitability of the earlier chapbook work or that of the delicious thumb-nail sketches of *Nurse Lovechild's Legacy*—surely the most inspired and appropriate work of the period. But what of that? They were called up by the book and they are a legitimate, if individually imagined comment upon it. They are *A Shropshire Lad* apropos of Lovat Fraser, and as such of interest and value. Being of Salopian descent myself and familiar with the Shropshire scene, I should cavil at some of his landscapes. They are certainly not Salopian, as I recall the scenario of that proud shire. They smack very much of Hertfordshire, where the artist spent so many happy days. But that is no more than cavil, for the Shropshire lad might have happened anywhere south of the Mersey and the Humber, just as Hardy's Wessex and all that word means might have stretched northwards to include Mercia and the Anglias, and eastwards to include Sussex. The scenario of both poems and pictures is the English countryside, and that should be enough. *A Shropshire Lad* must stand or fall by its poetry, not its local colour.

Another fault, and this perhaps is a little more serious, is a tendency towards a theatrical interpretation of certain themes. That is not excusable in the treatment of such poems. Instances are the perfectly inappropriate

stage peasant (xviii) and the inadequate and obviously stuffed Mithridates, to illustrate the humorous-grotesquerie of the famous penultimate poem in which there is so much veiled wisdom which the artist seems to have missed. On the other hand, there is much to be said for the point of view of such drawings as v, ix, xv, xvi, xxiii, and xlvii; and the purely ornamental pieces are always admirable, because they are at once non-committal and Lovat Fraser. One could easily imagine more appropriate, but not more distinguished decorations for these poems. The artist certainly does not show here the inevitable flair for his subject which was so evident in his earlier work in this *genre*. I suspect that was due to the probability that his appreciation of the poems was born of respect rather than affection. Such a conclusion would be in character.

The decorations as drawings have an independent interest. I have described them as mature, but they represent many stages of this side of Lovat Fraser's work. Here and there is the happy spontaneity of the nursery rhyme days of sheer play, but more often they reveal a responsibility, a consciousness of design, a portentousness which indicates the conventionalization of a boisterous and adorable gift, and possibly the mortal ripening of an art.

HOLBROOK JACKSON

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The gratitude of the Club is due to Mr. Harold Curwen, the owner of the copyright in the drawings reproduced in this book, for permission to use his property; to Mrs. Grace Lovat Fraser and Mr. Claud Fraser; to Mr. C. S. Millard, for assistance in connecting the drawings and the poems; to Mr. Albert Rutherston, for advice; and to Mr. Holbrook Jackson, for his Introduction.

## NOTE

The lyric-sequence *A Shropshire Lad* contains 63 numbered poems; and as Lovat Fraser's decorations are 63 in number, it was at first assumed that each drawing corresponded to a particular poem. A careful consideration of the drawings in their relation to the poems has enabled sixty of them to be so linked up; but three remain, which will not fit any individual poem; and as the originals of these are marked 'Back of half-title,' 'Contents,' and 'Contents II,' it is safe to assume that they were intended for the purposes mentioned. This arrangement leaves poems XXVII, XXXIII, and XLV without decorations, and makes this explanation necessary to establish that the whole series of the drawings are now printed without any omission.

A. J. A. Symons,
*Director*

The First Edition Club,
6 Little Russell Street, W.C.

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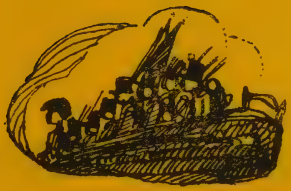

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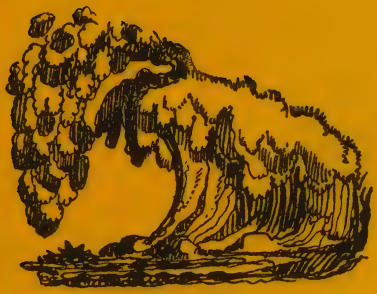

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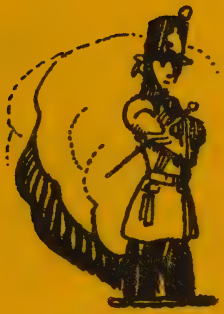

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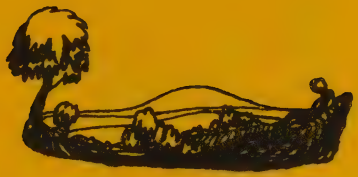

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